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**Written Testimony for the
Illinois Senate Health Committee
Subject Matter Hearing on the COVID-19 Vaccine
February 11, 2021**

With appreciation to Senator Morrison and all members of the Senate Health Committee, respectively, this written testimony is submitted for the record for the COVID-19 Vaccine subject matter hearing.

AARP Illinois acknowledges the care and concern expressed, and the actions taken by many to address the public health crisis we face because of the coronavirus pandemic. Even though millions of doses of the COVID-19 vaccines have shipped across the country, we acknowledge that vaccine production and distribution must be ramped up so that everyone who desires to be vaccinated can be. Yet, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) vaccine tracker, Illinois is among sixteen states that have administered less than half of the vaccine doses they have received. The delays we are experiencing in getting vaccine into the arms of older Illinoisans who desire to be vaccinated is beyond unacceptable. **Illinois needs to determine how it will safely, equitably, and effectively distribute COVID-19 vaccines, and it must take immediate action to provide clear, consistent information about when, where and how the 50+ population can get their shots – as well as assistance in signing up.**

According to the Illinois Department of Health (IDPH), since the start of the pandemic, the statewide total of positive cases of COVID-19 is 1,150,170 and the total number of deaths is 19,686. Illinoisans 50 years of age and older have accounted for 96% of all deaths from COVID-19. Nationally, nearly 95% of those who have died were age 50 or over. Some 40% have been residents and staff in nursing homes. Racial demographics are equally disturbing. White Americans are receiving the coronavirus vaccine at a higher rate than Black and Latino communities, underscoring how minority communities continue to be disproportionately hit by the ongoing pandemic.

With remarkable speed, vaccines have been developed, and continue to be developed, and now it's time to put them to good use. AARP is fighting for older Americans to be prioritized in getting COVID-19 vaccines because the science has clearly shown that older people are at higher risk of death.

AARP Illinois has 1.7 million members, and we have heard from them and the 50+ community about their experiences and frustrations in trying to get a vaccine. The reports of long-term care residents across our state being administered a mere fraction of readily available COVID-19 vaccines are alarming and inexcusable. This same population has endured and suffered the greatest during this pandemic due to chronic understaffing at nursing homes, as well as inadequate infection control policies. The most vulnerable Illinoisans once again face the fallout from the mismanagement and failure of vaccine deployment.

AARP members continue to confront obstacles in accessing and registering for their vaccination in Illinois. Most of our members cannot schedule an appointment because their screens freeze when trying to access the patchwork of business, county, or the state websites. They wait hours after calling their local health department -- only to be told they need to go to the website. And there are too many

ways to get registered – leaving anxious older adults to register every place possible without any follow-up about potential timeline of vaccination.

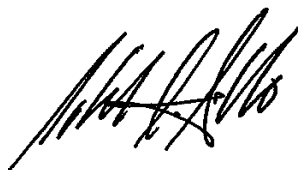
In addition, we are also hearing from many black and brown communities that in addition to access to the vaccine, they face other barriers like distrust in the vaccine. There is a long history of discrimination and exploitation of African Americans by the medical establishment that has led to mistrust and disparities impacting communities of color. This regretful history could be a contributing factor in a lower rate of vaccinations in the African American community.

Overall, Illinois distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine has been marked by unpredictable amounts of vaccine delivered, shifting eligibility criteria, varying and confusing distribution plans across counties, and on-line registration systems that confound even those who are computer literate and leave behind those without internet access. The situation has led to frustration, confusion, and anxiety for many. It is time to stop pointing fingers of blame and work together to remove the barriers that exist so that all individuals and families can access the vaccine regardless of age, income, race and ethnicity.

What needs to happen?

- State and local public health officials need to provide clear and timely information about when and where vaccines are available – and must provide assistance to those who need help signing up.
- Online sign-ups must be easy to navigate; and information must be provided in multiple languages and not just through the Internet.
- Approved vaccine providers must be available, widely publicized and adequately staffed. AARP is hearing that people are on hold for long periods, only to be told that no appointments are available.
- Ensure that communities of color and other underserved people receive information about COVID-19 vaccines from people they trust, like family, friends, doctors, religious and community leaders; and bring vaccine clinics to them in their neighborhoods rather than requiring them to go to their local hospital.

Thank you for your leadership in arranging this hearing on our state's COVID-19 vaccination plan. AARP Illinois stands ready to help you get COVID-19 vaccine information to older Illinoisans across the commonwealth as quickly as possible.



Bob Gallo
State Director
AARP Illinois